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Once-Mighty ISA Returns to Obscurity

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By Robert Keatley

WASHINGTON — Only two years ago—it seems much longer—internecine warfare within Lyndon Johnson's bureaucracy erupted over Vietnam policy.

Leading the guerrilla forces in favor of change were officials from a relatively obscure corner of the policy-making jungle, the Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs), known as ISA and then headed by a lawyer, Paul Warnke. Wise in the covert ways of bureaucratic insurgency, the bright young men of ISA centered their efforts on then Defense Secretary Clark Clifford, a confidant of President Johnson and one whose keen mind was harboring doubts about the wisdom of existing Vietnam policies.

The time was just after Tet, 1968, and a disillusioned officialdom was susceptible to radical change. The ISA crew exploited the opportunity with skill, assisted by another Pentagon office—that of Systems Analysis (whose occupants comprised the more famed "whiz kids" installed earlier by Robert McNamara). They helped critical Congressmen pose embarrassing questions about the status quo, they aided outsiders who wrote articles for prestigious publications attacking LBJ policies, they argued against escalation plans of the generals and, more important, they harangued Mr. Clifford incessantly ("with specificity") about failures of existing ways.

Secretary Clifford in turn argued with President Johnson, and played a major role in the LBJ decision to stop sending troop reinforcements, call a bombing halt and begin Paris peace negotiations.

(This at least is the way most inside accounts have told the tale. However, master insider Lyndon Johnson, giving his version the other night on CBS, credited Secretary of State Dean Rusk with advocating the bombing halt while Mr. Clifford was, relatively, a warmonger. No one should know better than the former President, but most critics contend his television performance contained much self-serving revision of recent history.)

'Best Foreign Policy Shop'?

In the deescalation process ISA became known around this gossipy town as the "best foreign policy shop" in Washington. Many rated it higher on analytical skill than the somewhat moribund State Department or LBJ's White House staff, headed respectively by Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow, both of whom the critics considered more ideological than analytical regarding Asian affairs. ISA's staffers, about half civilians and half military career men, gained a voice in foreign policy much more powerful than their numbers or seniority would indicate.

By some accounts, these men could still comprise the "best foreign policy shop" around—but rather few are found in ISA these days. Some of the military, of course, have received normal duty changes, including orders to Vietnam, but many staffers have quit, been fired or somewhat unsubtly encouraged to go. Some are in Washington even yet, but scattered. They can be found on Henry Kissinger's White House staff, back at the State Department or at such think tanks as the Brookings Institution or Johns Hopkins University. Mr. Warnke is now a partner in Clark Clifford's Washington law firm.

For ISA has changed, and it is no longer a congenial place for such free-wheeling minds out to change policies by unconventional work ways. The office's new leaders, installed by the Nixon Administration, are a different breed from those they succeeded. They bend distinctly to the political right, often oppose change rather than advocate it and somehow lack the elan of the old team. More important, ISA—by many accounts—seldom has the clout it once commanded in top policy-making circles, and sometimes its impact these days (when it has one at all) is more obstructive than innovative.

The changes are interesting for reasons that transcend the fate of that office itself. They tell something about how government works, and especially about President Nixon's insistence on the orderly conduct of foreign affairs. They also prove that Vietnam is no longer an issue dividing a troubled Administration—at least not in the same old discordant way.

The Office of International Security Affairs claims some 300 workers including clerical staff, about half of them military. Its function is to inject political considerations, especially those of foreign policy, into the Defense Department's decision-making process, so that Pentagon plans won't include moves that are militarily wise but politically disastrous. In effect it is a little State Department, assessing foreign political trends and figuring how these can or should affect what the U.S. does abroad, with emphasis on military considerations. During most of its decade of existence it has been led by capable men who played a major role in setting basic U.S. strategic policies.

A Move to the Right

The new boss is G. Warren Nutter, a former professor at the University of Virginia, foreign policy adviser to Barry Goldwater and frequent spokesman of the conservative view of world problems. A PhD from the University of Chicago, Mr. Nutter specializes in the Soviet economy, about which he has published several books and articles. He believes a major Moscow ambition is to secure a huge American foreign aid loan to modernize its troubled economy, perhaps so the USSR can deal with the West from greater strength. He takes a cautious view toward possibilities of true detente, and believes the expansionist tendencies of both Communist Russia and Communist China are now the greatest they have ever been—a view not widely held throughout the U.S. foreign establishment.

The chief deputy is Richard Ware, once a city official in Ann Arbor and more recently secretary of two tax-exempt foundations financed by a Michigan oilman. Although these two groups helped support a broad spectrum of men and institutions, they tended to favor those with a distinctly conservative bent. Years ago, Mr. Ware awarded two small study grants to Mr. Nutter, for example.

Some other right-thinking people have also been placed in ISA. The deputy for long-range foreign policy planning is Y. L. Wu, a courteous academician who specializes in the Chinese Communist economy (which may be failing) and once served as a minor official of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government (which did fail). Mr. Wu became a U.S. citizen in 1962. His forebodings about Peking's foreign policy ambitions aren't common among China specialists here. He believes, for example, that Peking is trying somehow to seize control of Japan for its industry and of Indonesia for its raw materials, and that the outcome depends greatly on how the Vietnam war ends.

ISA's thinking appears out of step with that of President Nixon, whose foreign policy is based on reducing U.S. foreign involvements and entering "an era of negotiations"—cautiously, of course—with Communist powers. Mr. Nutter and some superiors say that no basic difference really exists, that once a specific issue is under consideration there is no fundamental philosophic division. "Our views aren't that different really," says a top official on ISA's behalf.

Nevertheless, it's known that other agencies at times have had to ask senior Pentagon executives to spring loose proposals they had routed to ISA for action. Apparently Mr. Nutter's shop neither approved nor opposed these sometimes controversial measures directly, but simply held up the paper work on those it didn't like.

In ISA's defense, it is suggested this obstruction doesn't happen as often today as in the recent past. If so there may be a good reason: Some other agencies are routing important foreign policy papers straight to Secretary Melvin Laird and Deputy Secretary David Packard to avoid the risk of ISA's delaying them. Though normally such documents would flow through ISA, outside officials apparently believe bypassing ISA will result in faster and more definitive responses—even if the response is opposition.

Many sources say the views of International Security Affairs these days—in sharp contrast to two years ago—don't really matter much. Though it may be a bastion of conservativism in foreign affairs (and as such be a frequent liberal target), ISA is frequently ignored by the Republican leaders who put its people in office. Just why this has happened is not entirely clear, but two main reasons are often suggested by others who toil in foreign policy fields.

For one thing, the appointments may have been a payoff to right-wing Republicans, such as Senators Barry Goldwater and Strom Thurmond, who criticized the old ISA for its frequently abrasive relations with the military chiefs. Such conservatives wanted all whiz kid types cleaned out of the Pentagon, and the ISA changes could reflect a conscious effort to meet such demands. This would also soothe some ruffled military men who felt their prestige and responsibilities denigrated by those who wheeled and dealed in Mr. Warnke's day. But once in place, the new ISA leadership is often ignored by President Nixon, himself a pretty good foreign affairs operator, and by Secretary Laird, a former Congressman not lacking in political acumen. Thus the right is pacified with some prerogatives of high office, and the generals are appeased—but ideologists aren't allowed to interfere in the affairs of the pragmatists. Or so the theory has it.

Politics aside, ISA's obvious downgrading reflects Mr. Nixon's careful revamping of foreign policy machinery. With Henry Kissinger, he has revived the defunct National

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Security Council, leaving most of the staff in state back in the State Department, and thus restore more deliberate methods to the decision-making process. His passion for orderly procedure must have been offended by the activism of the old ISA crew, which subverted established ways in efforts to get policy changes it wanted but which most other bureaucrats opposed. Thus ISA is less influential because Mr. Nixon deliberately wants it so.

"It's now much more difficult to make end runs to the White House," Mr. Nutter himself says approvingly.

In addition, Vietnam is not the divisive issue it used to be. The Nixon team is not split over the substance of policy, though there may be differences concerning the speed of its implementation. Nowhere in the bureaucracy is there a subversive movement to upset basic national security decisions.

In earlier days ISA staffers (including many of the military men working there) found themselves at war with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, especially about Vietnam. Now the two groups seldom disagree (though Mr. Nutter and others are sensitive to outsiders' suggestions that they merely rubber-stamp what the generals decide rather than inject broader political considerations).

Harmony, But . . .

Yet this new harmony doesn't often become national policy. ISA and the JCS, it is said, want to go slower on withdrawing from Vietnam—a view Pentagon boss Laird doesn't sympathize with. They wanted to retain the Okinawa base complex as a nuclear arsenal; Mr. Nixon vetoed this on grounds that smooth political relations with Japan are more important. When the new Libyan government told the U.S. to abandon Wheelus Air Force Base before the lease expired, ISA wanted to "get tough"—though how and toward what end wasn't stated with precision.

There are recurring rumors that Messrs. Nutter and Wu and some others aren't happy at the Pentagon, that their academic backgrounds haven't prepared them for the devious, often rough-and-tumble ways of bureaucracy. "They just don't know how to get things done in government," smiles one close observer. In addition, they are not by personality dominant and persuasive men, and it is said they seldom take charge of meetings or skillfully steer discussions toward their own conclusions.

None of this means ISA has lost all standing. It still has a basic political function, which it exercises often. It also has some highly regarded men and important duties. For example, chief of the Asian section is a former CIA analyst named Dennis Doolin, who runs an interagency committee charged with coordinating Vietnamization, a key task. He consults often with Secretaries Laird and Packard as well as his immediate bosses. Another respected official is Rear Adm. William Lemos, by all accounts one of the U.S. military's most astute operators in the foreign affairs field and lavishly praised by those who know him. ISA is also deeply involved in such important subjects as arms sales to friendly countries.

Deliberate or not, the decline from the influence of two years ago is dramatic. A key long-time official can now ask, "What do you want to write about ISA for? It doesn't do anything." For the Republicans who placed ISA's present commanders in office often find their contributions irrelevant to the very real problems that must be resolved—and many others who toil in the foreign policy bureaucracy find this reassuring.